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Polish Population Losses during World War Two

By Otward Müller · October 10, 1984

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The following claims are continually put forth by Polish personalities: "Six million Poles lost their lives during the Second World War, a fifth of the entire population"; or "Three million Christian Poles [...] were victims of the Nazi terror." This article shows that statements of this sort are not compatible with the easily accessible population statistics of the pre- and post-war Poles. The conclusion is therefore that these loss figures are extremely exaggerated.

1. Introduction

In June 1983, Pope John Paul II visited Poland for the second time. The US press reported the following about this event from the city of Zschenstochau:[\[1\]](#)

"The Pope was in a somber mood and seemed to be close to tears when he recalled the Polish losses of 6 million people during the Second World War."

In his article entitled *Poland's Enduring Faith*, James Reston wrote:[\[2\]](#)

"The Pope stood up for the liberty and independence of Poland. He never mentioned the Soviet Union, but he explained that Poland had paid for its freedom and independence with six million of its citizens, who had sacrificed their lives at the various fronts of the war, in prisons and concentration camps."

The Pope has already made similar claims on other occasions. The Catholic weekly *The Wanderer* published an article on September 24, 1981, with the title "Pope says price of Poland's liberty was six million dead." This RNS report from Castle Gandolfo begins with the following sentence:

"In remarks apparently directed toward the Soviet Union, Pope John Paul II said that Poland had paid the price for its independence with the blood of six million Poles who had died in the Second World War."

During his first visit to his homeland in 1979, the Pope also visited Auschwitz. On June 24, 1979, the weekly *National Catholic Register* published the official English text of the sermon which the Pope gave during a mass in Birkenau. According to this text, he made the following statements:

"[...] I would like to pause with you over the inscription in Hebrew. This inscription awakens in us the memory of those people whose sons and daughters were intended for mass extermination. [...] No one is permitted to pass by this inscription unmoved. And finally, the last inscription, which is in Polish. Six million Poles, one-fifth of the entire population, lost their lives during the Second World War."

The last claim clearly assumes that, in addition to the losses of the Polish Jews, six million Christian Poles died. At the very least, this is the impression which the reader not familiar with the complexity of the population statistics in pre-war Eastern Europe must obtain from this statement by the Pope.

Naturally the Polish Pontiff is not imparting to us anything new. He is merely repeating, in a very effective manner, what the Communist government in Warsaw has claimed since the end of the Second World War. Even critical historians such as the British A.J.P. Taylor appear to credit these numbers. In his book *The Origins of the Second World War*, he writes:[\[3\]](#)

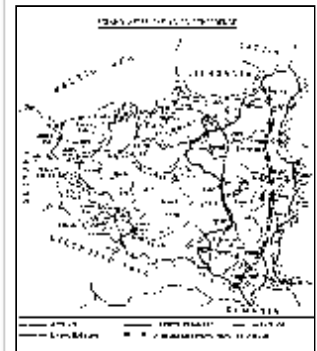
"Six and a half million Poles were killed."

German post-war politicians did not hesitate to accept these kinds of figures as 'historical facts' without putting themselves to the trouble of proving such accusations. West German President Gustav Heinemann, for example, stated on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War:[\[4\]](#)

"But Poland had a blood toll of six million. [...] These numbers of the dead include six million Poles."

Even encyclopedias cite this figure. Even today, these figures are still propagated, for example in the Church periodical *St. Anthony Messenger* of December 1998. They have already become 'common knowledge.'[\[5\]](#)

The author of this article is of the conviction that these casualty figures need to be examined for their content of truth. This is



Poland's territorial shift westward after WWII. Click for enlarged map

necessary because professional historians, especially in Germany, are not dealing with this unpleasant topic. This article, therefore, poses the question:

Did six million Poles really die during World War Two?

2. Definition of the term "Pole"

First of all, the term "Pole" must be defined. Who is a "Pole"?

Should, for example, a Polish Jew, who lived in Israel after the war- perhaps the former Minister President Menachem Begin- be counted as a "Pole" who was murdered by the National Socialists? He was, after all, no longer in Poland after the war. Or should a German soldier from Brelau, Danzig, Königsberg, Stettin or Oppeln, who was killed during the war as a member of the Wehrmacht, now be counted as a "Pole" exterminated by the National Socialists, merely because these cities were annexed to Poland after the war? What about the case of a Ukrainian who was declared on the spot to be a Polish citizen after the Polish incursive raids against Russia shortly after the end of the First World War, but who received Soviet nationality in October 1939? Is he a dead "Pole"? These few instances make it clear that the issue to be dealt with here is highly complex. An exhaustive investigation would rightly fill a thick book. To simplify our subject for this relatively short examination, a Pole will be defined as a person who is of "Polish nationality" in the sense of ethnic membership. In other words: this study attempts to record the fate of ethnic, Christian Poles.

The statements cited in the introduction are clearly formulated in such a manner that the average newspaper reader would believe the six-million-loss figure refers to ethnic Christian Poles. Yet, on the other hand, it ought to be recognized that there is a tendency, for example, in Polish propaganda to claim the losses of Polish Jews simultaneously

as Polish losses. Thus, one can read in one of the official histories of Poland prepared by the Polish embassy in Washington, D.C., that Poland had endured heavy losses during the war, "including the total destruction of cities like Gdansk, Szczecin and Wroclaw." The destruction of the German cities of Danzig, Stettin and Breslau are therefore claimed here as "Polish losses." This is a plain example of the methodology of Polish propaganda. Historical justice, however, requires that Poland does not claim German and Jewish losses as "Polish losses."

3. The Pre-War Population of Poland

Pre-war Poland, with its 37.339 million inhabitants was a state with minorities of many nationalities. Among them were 24.388 million ethnically Poles, mostly Catholics. The remaining 10.951 million consisted of non-Polish nationalities who merely had Polish citizenship. These figures are given by Edward J. Rozek in his book *Allied Wartime Diplomacy-A Pattern of Poland*.[\[6\]](#) At the time of the publication of this book, Dr. Rosek was Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Colorado in Boulder. On page 37 of his book, he lists the composition of the non-Polish population for the year 1939, in particular the Eastern portion of pre-war Poland:

Ukrainians	4.529 Million
White Russians	1.123 Million
Polesians	0.822 Million
Russians	0.134 Million
Lithuanians	0.084 Million
Czechs	0.035 Million

In addition, there were also:

Jews	3.000 Million
Germans	1.041 Million

The number of Jews living in Poland in 1939 was taken from the *Jewish Chronicle*:[\[7\]](#)

"Once three million strong, Poland's Jewish population today has shrunk to a dwindling remnant of 20.000"

Finally, the last figures for the Germans in pre-war Poland were taken from an excellent treatment of the same topic.[\[8\]](#) The question confronting us now is: What happened to these people after the Second World War? The main focus of this investigation is the fate of the 24.388 Christian Poles.

It is an incontestable historical fact that the Ukrainians, White Russians, Polesians, Lithuanians and 30-40% of Poland's Jews, as well as some millions of ethnic Poles became Soviet citizens after September/October 1939. (The Lithuanians actually first became so in the year 1940.) After that time, these people no longer lived under Polish sovereignty. Their war losses must in reality be attributed to those of the Soviet Union and not to those of Poland, whatever may have happened to these people during the war. Were it otherwise, these losses would surface as doubled in the loss statistics of the World War. However, one would except from this the approximately 4.3 million ethnic Poles living east of the Curzon Line.[\[6\]](#)

The approximately one million Germans (ethnic Germans) became German nationals after September 1939.

4. The Post-War Population of Poland

What happened after the war? The Soviet Union kept the territories which they had conquered since 1939. One third of the newly created Polish state had been German soil. The German populace of these eastern provinces of Germany were driven out of their home, in which

their forefathers had lived long before the discovery of America by Columbus.

On February 14, 1946, and on December 3, 1950, censuses were conducted in Poland. The results of the first census, however, are worthless for the purposes of this investigation, since the expulsion of the Germans was then still in full swing. In addition, the immigration of the Poles from the areas conquered by the Soviet Union had not yet ended.

According to the census of December 1950, after the greatest ethnic cleansing in history had just about been concluded, living in post-war Poland, which had been created in Yalta, there were either

24.6137 Million Poles, or

24.533 Million Poles

The first figure is given by Reichling,[\[9\]](#) the second by Barnett.[\[10\]](#) These numbers are slightly less than those given by *Information Please Almanac* for 1949 (p. 50) gave for the year 1947: 24.775 million. The difference may be explained by the fact that in the years 1948-1950 approximately a quarter million Germans were expelled.[\[11\]](#) The ethnic composition of this population is described in *Collier's Encyclopedia* as follows:[\[12\]](#)

"Although a great number of minorities lived in pre-war Poland, who altogether made up one third of the total population, post-war Poland became a homogeneous country: 98% of the population are ethnic Poles."

According to Reichling, on December 3, 1950, approximately 1.7 million Germans were still living in Poland, *i.e.*, persons who until 1945 had possessed German nationality. However, this number must be

subtracted from the total number, if one wishes to determine how many Christian Poles survived the Second World War.

But what happened to the ethnic Poles who, according to Rozek,[\[6\]](#)re living east of the Curzon Line in 1939, *i.e.*, east of the post-war border between Poland and the Soviet Union, and therefore in areas annexed by Stalin? Up until June of 1948, the Soviets permitted only about 1.5038 million persons of Polish origin to emigrate to Poland. Even after the end of the war, approximately 2.8 million Poles continued to live in areas of pre-war Poland which since that time had come to belong to the Soviet Union.[\[12\]](#)

During the war, many Poles fled to the West, *i.e.*, to France, England, and to the USA. At least half a million Poles, mostly members of the army of the Polish government-in-exile, who fought on the side of the Western Allies, refused to return to their Communist-ruled fatherland after the end of the war.[\[12\]](#)

Breaking down this segment results in the following list:

Population of Poland in December 1950	24.6137 million
minus Germans remaining	-1.7 million
plus ethnic Poles in the Soviet Union	+2.8 million
plus permanently emigrated ethnic Poles	+ 0.5 million
Ethnic Poles who survived the Second World War including the natural population growth in the period 1939-1950	26.2137 million

This post-war census count of 26.2 million ethnic-Christian Poles must be compared with the corresponding number from the year 1939, *i.e.*, 24.388 million.[\[6\]](#) The conclusion ought to be plain: In the year 1950, the number of ethnic Poles was about 1.826 million greater than before the war. Easily accessible population statistics of the pre- and post-war period clearly show that there is *no proof* that "six million Christian

Poles were killed during the war." Their true numbers lost probably amount to the scale of a few hundred thousand at most.

The result of this statistical examination fully confirms the more general determination made by Barnett in his book *Poland* on page 43:

"Despite the enormous effect of the Second World War, the structure vis-à-vis age and sex of the population remained rather the same as it was in 1939."

The article from the *New York Times* by J. Reston, mentioned in the introduction, ends with the following findings:

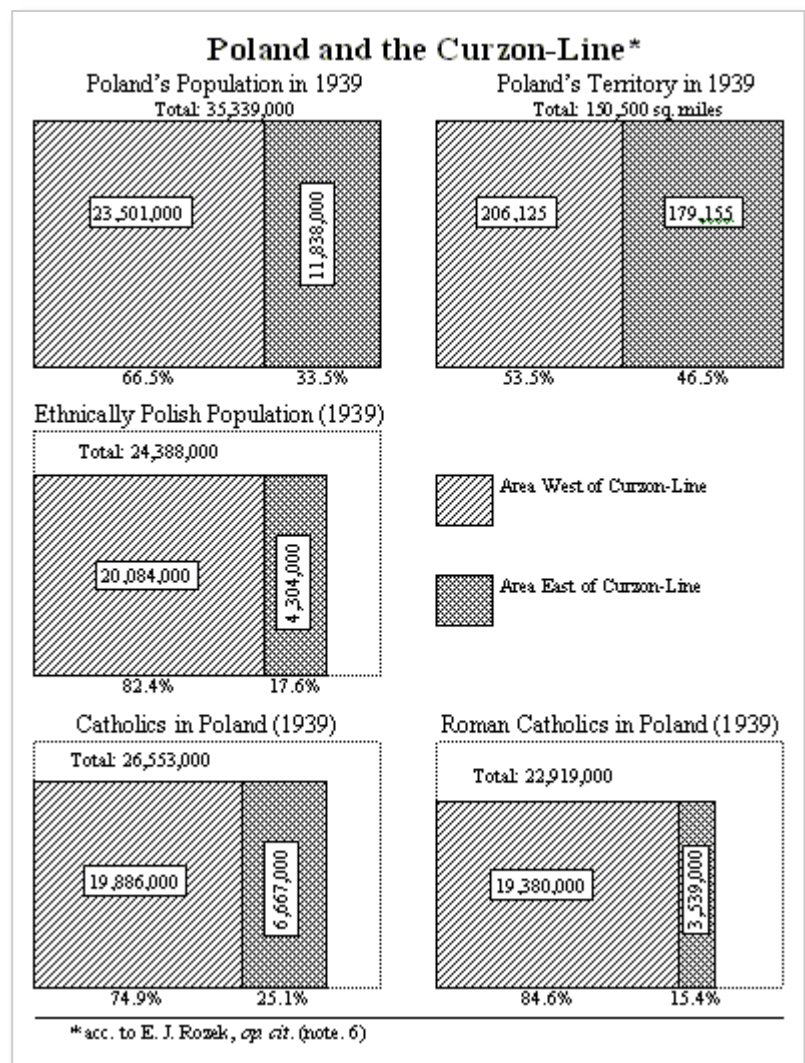
"In spite of all the suffering and death, they [the Poles] are now a million more than before the bloodbath of the last war. Their beautiful children can be seen here in the streets, and they were clearly the addressees of the Pope's message."

In actuality, the number of Christian Poles increased not by a million, but rather jumped from 24.388 in 1939 to 36.3 million in 1982![\[13\]](#) And this increase of 12 million does not even include those Poles who live in the Soviet Union or who emigrated to the West. Therein lies further proof for the fact that the biological substance of the Polish people survived the Second World War very well indeed-far better than that of Germany. Such a phenomenal population growth-at least for European conditions-would have been impossible if "six million Poles" or even only three million had been "victims of the Nazi terror."

If one now dares to doubt that "six million Poles died," it will be suggested by, for example, the Polish-American Congress Inc., that one had misunderstood what the Pope was saying, and that "three million Christian Poles as well as 3 million Jews, who were all citizens of Poland, were victims of the Nazi terror."[\[14\]](#) The fact that today

many Jews originally from Poland are living in Israel, America, and Western Europe proves that even the second figure is exaggerated. It is also interesting that Polish losses due to measures taken by the Soviet Union are hardly ever mentioned.

Up to the year 1998, the Polish population climbed to 38.7 million, by the way, without immigration of millions of "asylum-seekers," "guest workers," "refugees" etc.[\[15\]](#)



5. Natural Population Growth: A further Argument

According to Barnett,[\[16\]](#) the natural rate of growth of the Polish population in the last year of peace was slightly over one per cent. In the year 1983, the rate of increase of the Polish population was about 0.9%.[\[13\]](#)

It is obvious that this rate of increase was smaller during the war but afterwards it climbed again, especially since approximately 694,000 Polish soldiers at least initially were held as prisoners of war by the Germans, and 217,000 by the Soviets.

After the end of the war there was a baby boom in Poland. Therefore, an average one per cent rate of growth appears to be acceptable. Now let us consider the time span between 1939/40 and 1955, i.e. 15 years. Two cases are considered:

- Case A: Relatively small losses
- Case B: An accepted war loss of 3.0 million.

In 1955, the population of Poland amounted to 27.533 million:[\[10\]](#)

Case A:

Ethnic Poles 1939:[\[6\]](#) N = 24.388 million. 1% factor of increase/year from 1940-1955 (15 years): $M = (1.01)^{15} = 1.1610$

Poles 1955: $M \times N = 28.314$ million

Conclusion: The losses of the Poles in the Second World War were relatively small. Their number would even have been about the same had there been no war.

Case B: Accepting a war loss figure of 3 million

Ethnic Poles 1939:[\[6\]](#): 24.388 million. Alleged extermination of Christian Poles in the period of 1939-1945: -3.000 million. Poles 1945: P = 21.388 million. 1% factor of increase/year from 1945-1955 (10 years): $M = (1.01)^{10} = 1.1046$.

Poles 1955: $M \times P = 23.626$ million

Conclusion

If claims by Polish propaganda were correct, that 3 million Christian Poles were killed during the Second World War, the number of Poles in the year 1955, calculated on the basis of pre-war data, should be

close to 23.626 million. But in 1955, there were actually 28.444 million, which corresponds to Case A. From this emerges the following good news: During the Second World War, three million Poles were *not* murdered by the "Nazis" or by anyone else.

In Case A the number of Poles remaining in the Soviet Union were assumed to be merely 2 million, in order to avoid the objection that I was "exaggerating" the starting number to begin with. As reference for this number, I give the *Encyclopedia Americana*, which states:[\[17\]](#)

"A large number of Poles-probably more than 2.000 million-did not succeed in crossing over the border to post-war Poland, and were incorporated into the eastern side of the Polish-Soviet border."

One could also find other sources for this number.

One issue is still open and awaits an answer: why should the Catholic and the Communist Poland exaggerate its losses in this way? The answer to this is simple: the Poles wish to 'justify' their genocide of the German people committed after 1945 in the Eastern provinces of Germany. They are trying to justify the unjustifiable. In this sad affair, Polish Communists and Catholics, atheists and Christians are of the same feather.

The claim put out by the *Polish-American Review*, that "Poles suffered the greatest losses of human life of all the countries of the Second World War,"[\[18\]](#) is simply *not true*.

6. An Interesting Table

Barnett has published a very interesting table entitled "Population of Poland," which is frequently quoted. In this table, the number of the respective populations of the individual Voivod districts of post-war

Poland is given. This means that the regions which belonged to Poland between the world wars, but which were conquered by the Soviet Union in 1945, are not given; yet the eastern provinces of Germany annexed by Poland are. This table now compares the population of this region in the year 1931^[19] with that in the years 1946, 1950 and 1955. The total population is stated as follows:

Population of Poland 1955	27.554 million
minus Germans remaining	-1.6 million
plus ethnic Poles in the Soviet Union	+2.0 million
plus permanently emigrated ethnic Poles	+0.5 million
Total:	28.444 million

1931	1946	Difference
29.892 million	23.625 million	6.267 million

This corresponds to a relative change of -21%, a "fifth of the entire population" or a loss of 6.267 million people. But the number of 1931 contains the districts of Allenstein (Olsztyn, East Prussia), Danzig (Gdansk, West Prussia), Köslin (Koszalin, Pommerania), Stettin (Szczecin, Pommerania), Grünberg (Zielona Gora, Silesia), Breslau (Wroclaw, Silesia) und Oppeln (Opole, Silesia), which were all part of Germany in 1931 with an overwhelming German majority in population (95-100%).

According to Reichling, in 1944, 11 million Germans were living in the region which would later be a part of post-war Poland.^[20] After the majority of this population had been killed or brutally expelled by the victors of the Second World War, a process which had was no way complete in 1946, these areas naturally had to record an enormous population 'loss.'^[21] These facts, however, are nowhere rendered in this table.

The following suspicion thus arises: Is it perhaps possible that the Poles are counting those Germans as "Poles exterminated by the Nazis," whom they killed in the campaign of their genocide in Eastern Germany or hunted out of their homes? This is only a suspicion. After all, how the Poles arrived at their 6- or even 3-million-figure has not been made known up to this point. But wherever the truth may lie: the striking similarity of the 'losses' in this widely used and known table on the one hand and the officially claimed losses on the other hand is at the least surprising and amazing.

7. "Polish" Ukrainians

The population of pre-war Poland encompassed many Ukrainians, White Russians, Lithuanians, Russians, and other nationalities. The legitimate question is, therefore, how these people have become 'Poles.' The answer to this is interesting, but unfortunately little known. After 150 years of non-existence as a state, the independent state of Poland was founded anew in 1916 as a monarchy by Germany and Poland. After the defeat of Germany, however, the monarchy fell and was replaced by a military dictatorship, which immediately turned aggressively against its neighbors. Against the conditions of the armistice of November 1918, but with the support of the victorious Western powers and of the League of Nations, Poland conquered areas in Upper Silesia, West- and East Prussia from Germany whose population had a strong German majority. In so doing, Poland and the supporting League of Nation breached the conditions of the armistice and the recently codified and recognized right of self-determination. Not satisfied with these enormous territorial gains, Poland subsequently turned against the Soviet Union, which at that time was still struggling through its civil war. On April 28, 1920, the young Polish army under the leadership of the Polish dictator Pilsudski invaded the Ukraine. On May 6, 1920, the Polish army reached Kiev.

This first war of aggression after the end of the First World War finally ended on March 18, 1921, with the peace treaty of Riga, signed by Poland and the Soviet Union. This determined that the Soviet Union ceded large territories from parts of Lithuania, White Russia, and the Ukraine to Poland. Millions of Ukrainians, White Russians, Lithuanians, and Russians thus became 'Poles.' It was a matter of course that Moscow would not put up for long with this defeat inflicted upon it by the Poles. The Poles then laid the foundation for the later Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939.

8. Summary and Conclusion

C. R. Barnett: Table 1. Population of Poland

	In Thousands				In Percent		
					1931	1946	1950
					to	to	to
Wojwodschaft ^(a)	1931	1946	1950	1955	1946	1950	1955
Warsaw (incl. city)	3,552	2,662	2,809	3,245	-25.1	5.5	15.5
Bydgoszcz	1,566	1,457	1,470	1,597	- 7.0	0.9	8.6
Poznan	2,311	2,086	2,109	2,304	- 9.7	1.1	9.2
Lodz (incl. city)	2,385	2,015	2,047	2,210	-15.5	1.6	8.0
Kielce	1,858	1,702	1,659	1,763	8.4	- 2.6	6.3
Lublin	2,069	1,753	1,640	1,719	-15.3	- 6.5	4.8
Bialystok	1,194	944	952	1,040	-20.9	0.8	9.2
Olsztyn	1,030	442	675	811	-57.1	52.8	20.1
Gdansk	1,065	732	891	1,082	-31.3	21.6	21.4
Koszalin	789	585	514	632	-25.8	-12.1	23.0
Szczecin	941	308	508	661	-67.3	65.1	30.1
Zielona Gora	884	347	560	678	-60.7	61.4	21.1

Wroclaw	2,604	1,769	1,735	1,986	-32.1	- 1.9	14.5
Opole	1,040	792	811	887	-23.8	2.3	9.4
Katowice	2,608	2,363	2,635	3,040	- 9.4	11.5	15.4
Cracow	2,195	2,133	2,147	2,359	- 2.8	0.7	9.9
Rzeszow	1,801	1,535	1,371	1,530	-14.7	-10.7	11.6
Total Population	29,892	23,625	24,533	27,544	-21.0	3.8	12.3

(a) Pre-war borders adjusted to 1950; pre-war borders of the provinces as in the year given.

Source: Acc. to: Mauldin, W. Parker and Akers, Donald S., *The Population of Poland*, p. 122, and from Polska Rzeczypoupolita Ludowa, *Główny Urząd Statystyczny*, Rocznik Statystyczny 1956 (Polish Peoples Republic: Statistical Main Office, Statistical Yearbook 1956). p. 44.

Polish claims that "Six million Poles [...] a fifth of the entire population" were killed during the Second World War or became "victims of Nazi terror," have never been supported by facts by the Polish government. The same is true for the claim that "3 million Christian Poles" died.

The comparison between the pre- and post-war population statistics performed in this study shows that, on the contrary, the losses of the ethnic Christian Poles are relatively small. The 6- or 3-million-figures are exaggerations of propaganda which have spread worldwide, in order to 'justify' Poland's post-war policy of genocide of the German people, *i.e.*, of the expulsion of the Eastern Germans with wholesale mass murder and the annexation of East Germany.

The actual losses are probably in the order of one tenth of the figures claimed.

The population figures used in this investigation can be checked by any interested person in well-stocked university libraries.

Naturally, the Polish government and the representatives of Polish interests have the right to exert their efforts on behalf of Polish interests. But by so doing, they should not claim Jewish, German, Ukrainian, and White Russian losses as Polish losses.

In view of this result, I propose as conclusion that all casualty figures of the Second World War be checked and scientifically investigated by an international commission of experts from neutral historians and demographers.

Further Reading

Next to the works listed in the Notes, I recommend as literature for further study:

- Albin Eissner, "Personelle Kriegsverluste des polnischen Volkes," *Außenpolitik (Foreign Policy)*, 14(1) (1963), pp. 44-52
- Stanislaus Sopicki, *Mehr Genauigkeit in den Zahlen!* (More Exactitude in Numbers!), in: *Wiadomosci*, Vol. XXV, No. 1247, Feb. 22, 1970; Ger.: Institut für Osteuropakunde, Universität Mainz, Nov. 27, 1970

Notes

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[1] Sunday *Times Union*, Albany, N.Y., Combined Wire Service, June 19, 1983, p. A12. Re-translated from German.

[2] *New York Times*, June 19, 1983, p. E19. Re-translated from German.

- [3] Premier Books, 1965, p. 292. Re-translated from German.
- [4] *The German Tribune*, Sept. 16, 1969, No. 388, p. 4.
- [5] E. Dybicz, "Crosses at Auschwitz Appropriate", *St. Anthony Messenger* (circulation: 315.000), December 1998, p. 3-4: "In six years of war, Poland lost over six million of its citizens, 22 per cent of its entire population."
- [6] John Wiley & Sons, New York 1958, p. 348.
- [7] London, edition of March 22, 1968, p. 7, re-translated from German. I am aware of the problem of this number, probably excessive by several hundred thousand Jews, but I forgo making any needed corrections here, since this would not basically influence the result of my study; cf. W. N. Sanning, *Die Auflösung des osteuropäischen Judentums* Grabert, Tübingen, p. 16-22; Engl: *The Dissolution of East European Jewry*, Institute for Historical Review, Costa Mesa 1983.
- [8] "Die polnischen Kriegsverluste 1939-1945" (Polish War Losses), *Zeitschrift für Politik* (Cologne) 25(3) (1978), p. 279-296.
- [9] Gerhard Reichling, *Deutsche und Polen – 1945 bis 1970 im Spiegel der polnischen amtlichen Statistik* (Germans and Poles-1945 to 1970 as reflected in official Polish statistics), Kulturstiftung der deutschen Vertriebenen (Cultural Institute of German Expellees), issue 1, Verlag Osmipress, Bonn 1979, p. 21.
- [10] Clifford R. Barnett, *Poland: Its Society, Its Culture, Its People*, Hraf Press, New Haven, Conn., 1958, Table 1
- [11] G. Reichling, *op. cit.* (Note 9), p. 23
- [12] Vol. 19, 1979, p. 181; re-translated from German.
- [13] *Information Please Almanac*, 1983, p. 246.
- [14] *Times Union*, July 17, 1983.
- [15] *The World Almanac*, 1998, p. 810.
- [16] C.R. Barnett, *op. cit.* (note 10), p. 42.
- [17] 13th Edition, 1968, p. 287; re-translated from German.
- [18] Edition of March/April/May 1983; re-translated from German.
- [19] The last official population count in Poland took place in 1931.
- [20] G. Reichling, *op. cit.* (note 9), p. 43.
- [21] Cf. Alfred de Zayas, *The German Expellees: Victims in War and Peace*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1993; Cf. also in German *Anmerkungen zur Vertreibung*, (Notes on the Expulsion) Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1986.

Author



[Otward Müller](#)

Dr. Otward Müller was a German-born US scholar who wrote several revisionist studies.

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